

# Lord of the Flies

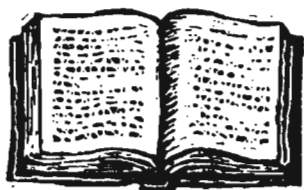
William Golding

1954

Despite its later popularity, William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* was only a modest success when it was first published in England in 1954, and it sold only 2,383 copies in the United States in 1955 before going out of print. Critical reviews and British word of mouth were positive enough, however, that by the time a paperback edition was published in 1959, *Lord of the Flies* began to challenge *The Catcher in the Rye* as the most popular book on American college campuses. By mid-1962 it had sold more than 65,000 copies and was required reading on more than one hundred campuses.

The book seemed to appeal to adolescents' natural skepticism about the allegedly humane values of adult society. It also captured the keen interest of their instructors in debating the merits and defects of different characters and the hunting down of literary sources and deeper symbolic or allegorical meanings in the story—all of which were in no short supply. Did the ending of the story—a modern retelling of a Victorian story of children stranded on a deserted island—represent the victory of civilization over savagery, or vice versa? Was the tragic hero of the tale Piggy, Simon, or Ralph? Was Golding's biggest literary debt owed to R. M. Ballantyne's children's adventure story *The Coral Island* or to Euripides's classic Greek tragedy *The Bacchae*?

Though the popularity of Golding's works as a whole has ebbed and grown through the years, *Lord of the Flies* has remained his most read book. The questions raised above, and many more like



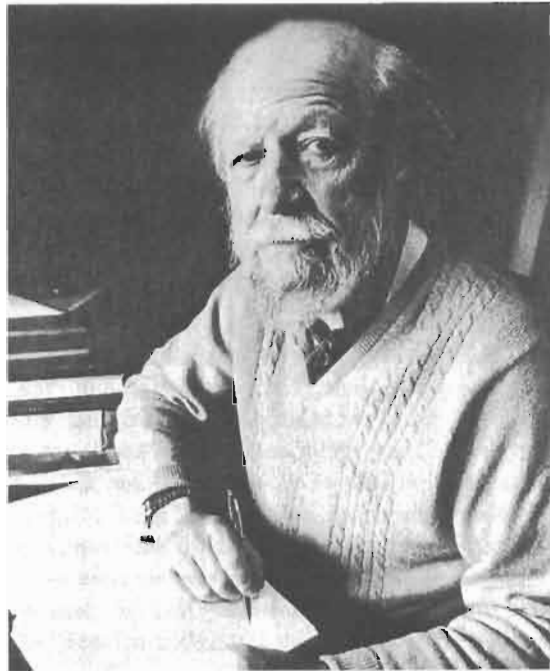
them, have continued to fascinate readers. It is for this reason, more than any other, that many critics consider *Lord of the Flies* a classic of our times.

## Author Biography

From an unknown schoolmaster in 1954, when *Lord of the Flies* was first published, William Golding became a major novelist over the next ten years, only to fall again into relative obscurity after the publication of the generally well-received *The Spire* in 1964. This second period of obscurity lasted until the end of the 1970s. The years 1979 to 1982 were suddenly fruitful for Golding, and in 1983 he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. How does one account for a life filled with such ups and downs? There can be no one answer to that question, except perhaps to note that Golding's motto, "Nothing Twice," suggests a man with an inquiring mind who was not afraid to try many different approaches to his craft. He knew that while some of his efforts might fail, others would be all the stronger for the attempt.

Born in 1911, Golding was the son of an English schoolmaster, a many-talented man who believed strongly in science and rational thought. Golding often described his father's overwhelming influence on his life. The author graduated from Oxford University in 1935 and spent four years (later described by Golding as having been "wasted") writing, acting, and producing for a small London theater. Golding himself became a schoolmaster for a year, after marrying Ann Brookfield in 1939 and before entering the British Royal Navy in 1940.

Golding had switched his major from science to English literature after two years in college—a crucial change that marked the beginning of Golding's disillusion with the rationalism of his father. The single event in Golding's life that most affected his writing of *Lord of the Flies*, however, was probably his service in World War II. Raised in the sheltered environment of a private English school, Golding was unprepared for the violence unleashed by the war. Joining the Navy, he was injured in an accident involving detonators early in the war, but later was given command of a small rocket-launching craft. Golding was present at the sinking of the *Bismarck*—the crown ship of the German Navy—and also took part in the D-Day landings in



William Golding

France in June 1944. He later described his experience in the war as one in which "one had one's nose rubbed in the human condition."

After the war, Golding returned to teaching English and philosophy at the same school where he had begun his teaching career. During the next nine years, from 1945 until 1954, he wrote three novels rejected for their derivative nature before finally getting the idea for *Lord of the Flies*. After reading a bedtime boys adventure story to his small children, Golding wondered out loud to his wife whether it would be a good idea to write such a story but to let the characters "behave as they really would." His wife thought that would be a "first class idea." With that encouragement, Golding found that writing the story, the ideas for which had been germinating in his mind for some time, was simply a matter of getting it down on paper.

Golding went on to write ten other novels plus shorter fiction, plays, essays, and a travel book. Yet it is his first novel, *Lord of the Flies*, that made him famous, and for which he will probably remain best known. Golding died of a heart attack in 1993.

## Plot Summary

### *On the Island: Chapters 1–2*

William Golding sets his novel *Lord of the Flies* at a time when Europe is in the midst of nuclear destruction. A group of boys, being evacuated from England to Australia, crash lands on a tropical island. No adults survive the crash, and the novel is the story of the boys' descent into chaos, disorder, and evil.

As the story opens, two boys emerge from the wreckage of a plane. The boys, Ralph and Piggy, begin exploring the island in hopes of finding other survivors. They find a conch shell, and Piggy instructs Ralph how to blow on it. When the other boys hear the conch, they gather. The last boys to appear are the choirboys, led by Jack Merridew. Once assembled, the boys decide they need a chief and elect Ralph. Ralph decides that the choir will remain intact under the leadership of Jack, who says they will be hunters.

Jack, Ralph, and Simon go to explore the island and find a pig trapped in vines. Jack draws his knife, but is unable to actually kill the pig. They vow, however, to kill the pig the next time. When the three return, they hold a meeting. The conch becomes a symbol of authority: whoever has the conch has the right to speak. Jack and Ralph explain to the others what they have found. Jack continues his preoccupation with his knife. The boy with the clearest understanding of their situation is Piggy. He tells them they are on an island, that no one knows where they are, and that they are likely to be on the island for a very long time without adults. Ralph replies, "This is our island. It's a good island. Until the grownups come to fetch us we'll have fun." One of the "littluns," the group of youngest boys, says that he is afraid of the "beastie." The "biguns" try to dissuade him, saying there are no beasties on the island. However, it is at this moment that Jack asserts himself against Ralph, saying that if there were a beastie, he would kill it.

Discussion returns to the possibility of rescue. Ralph says that rescue depends on making a fire so that ships at sea could see the smoke. The boys get overly excited, with Jack as the ringleader, and all but Piggy and Ralph rush off to the top of the mountain to build a fire. They forget about the conch and the system of rules they have just made. At the top of the mountain, Ralph uses Piggy's glasses to light the fire. They are careless and set fire to the mountain. Piggy accuses them of "acting like kids." He

reminds the older boys of their responsibility to the younger boys. At this moment they realize that one of the littluns is missing.

### *The Beast: Chapters 3–11*

The story resumes days later with Simon and Ralph trying to build shelters on the shore. Jack is away hunting. When he returns, there is antagonism between Ralph and Jack. Jack is beginning to forget about rescue and is growing tired of the responsibility of keeping the fire going, a task for which he has volunteered his choir. The growing separation between the boys is marked by Ralph's insistence on the importance of shelter and Jack's on the hunting of meat.

In the next chapter, Golding describes the rhythm of life on the island. By this point, Jack has begun to paint his face with mud and charcoal when he hunts. At a crucial moment, the fire goes out, just as Ralph spots a ship in the distance. In the midst of Ralph's distress, the hunters return with a dead pig. In the ensuing melee, one of the lenses in Piggy's glasses gets broken.

Ralph calls an assembly in order to reassert the rules. The littluns bring up their fear of the beastie yet again, saying that it comes from the sea. Simon tries to suggest that the only beast on the island is in themselves; however, no one listens. Ralph once again calls for the rules. Jack, however, plays to the fear of the boys, and says, "Bollocks to the rules! We're strong—we hunt! If there's a beast, we'll hunt it down! We close in and beat and beat and beat—!" The meeting ends in chaos. Ralph, discouraged, talks with Piggy and Simon about their need for adults. "If only they could get a message to us.... If only they could send us something grownup ... a sign or something."

The sign that appears, however, comes when all the boys are asleep. High overhead rages an air battle and a dead parachutist falls to the island. When the boys hear the sound of the parachute, they are sure it is the beast. Jack, Ralph, and Simon go in search. Climbing to the top of the mountain, they see "a creature that bulged." They do not recognize the figure as a dead parachutist, tangled in his ropes, and swaying in the wind.

When the boys return to the littluns and Piggy at the shelters, Jack calls an assembly. He calls Ralph a coward and urges the boys to vote against Ralph. They will not, and Jack leaves. Ralph tries to reorganize the group, but notices that gradually most of the biguns sneak off after Jack. The scene shifts to Jack, talking to his hunters. They go off

on a hunt in which they kill a sow, gruesomely and cruelly. They cut off the pig's head and mount it on a stick in sacrifice to the beast. Meanwhile, Simon wanders into the woods in search of the beast. He finds the head, now called in the text "The Lord of the Flies." Simon feels a seizure coming on as he hallucinates a conversation with the head:

Simon's head was tilted slightly up. His eyes could not break away and the Lord of the Flies hung in space before him.

"What are you doing out here all alone? Aren't you afraid of me?"

Simon shook.

"There isn't anyone to help you. Only me. And I'm the Beast."

Simon's mouth labored, brought forth audible words.

"Pig's head on a stick."

"Fancy thinking the Beast was something you could hunt and kill!" said the head. For a moment or two the forest and all the other dimly appreciated places echoed with the parody of laughter. "You knew didn't you? I'm part of you? Close, close, close! I'm the reason why it's no go? Why things are what they are?"

Simon falls into unconsciousness. When he awakens, he finds the decomposed body of the parachutist, and realizes that this is what the boys think is the beast. He gently frees the dead man from his ropes.

Back at the shelters, Ralph and Piggy are the only ones left. The two go to see Jack and the hunters, and they find a big party. At the height of the party, a storm breaks and Simon arrives to tell them that there is no beast. In a frenzy, they kill Simon. Later, Ralph, Piggy, Sam, and Eric are alone on the beach. All the boys agree that they left the dance early and that they did not see anything. The four boys try to keep the fire going, but they cannot. Jack's hunters attack the boys and steal Piggy's glasses so that they have the power of fire. Enraged, Ralph and Piggy go to retrieve the glasses. There is a fight, and Roger, the most vicious of the hunters, launches a rock at Piggy, knocking the conch from his hands, and sending him some forty feet to the rocks in the sea below.

### ***The Rescue: Chapter 12***

The scene shifts to Ralph, alone, hiding from the rest of the boys who are hunting him. The language used to describe the boys has shifted: they are now "savages," and "the tribe." Ralph is utterly alone, trying to plan his own survival. He finds the Lord of the Flies, and hits the skull off the stick.



*From the film Lord of the Flies, 1963.*

Ralph sees Sam and Eric serving as lookouts for the tribe and approaches them carefully. They warn him off, saying that they've been forced to participate with the hunters. When Ralph asks what the tribe plans on doing when they capture him, the twins will only talk about Roger's ferocity. They state obliquely, "Roger sharpened a stick at both ends."

Ralph tells the twins where he will hide; but soon the twins are forced to reveal this location and Ralph is cornered. However, the tribe has once again set the island on fire, and Ralph is able to creep away under the cover of smoke. Back on the beach, Ralph finds himself once again pursued. At the moment that the savages are about to capture him, an adult naval officer appears. Suddenly, with rescue at hand, the savages once again become little boys and they begin to cry. The officer cannot seem to understand what has happened on the island. "Fun and games," he says, unconsciously echoing Ralph's words from the opening chapter. Ralph breaks down and sobs, mourning Simon and mourning Piggy. In the final line of the book, Golding reminds the reader that although adults have arrived, the rescue is a faulty one. The officer looks out to sea at his "trim cruiser in the distance." The world, after all, is still at war.

## Characters

### **Bill**

Like Maurice, Bill is initially confused by the clash of values among the boys. At first he seems seduced by Jack's painted face into joining the hunters in their anonymity; yet he then turns fearful and runs away. Eventually, however, Bill imagines group hunting and "being savages" as "jolly good fun" and thus a way of banishing these fears. He tries to convince Ralph's group to accept Jack's invitation to the feast, thinking that Jack is less fearful than Ralph about going into the jungle to hunt. Soon he has defected to Jack's group and is seen painted like a savage and stalking Ralph.

### **Eric**

See Samneric

### **Henry**

Henry is the biggest littlun and a relative of the littlun with the mulberry-marked face who disappears after the first big fire. Henry is the object of Roger's seemingly innocent game of throwing stones. Later, Henry defects to Jack's camp and is part of the raiding party that steals fire from Ralph and Piggy.

### **Johnny**

Along with Percival, Johnny is the smallest of the littluns. He is described as "well built, with fair hair and a natural belligerence," which he soon shows by throwing sand in Percival's face. Later, Johnny is shown crying when he thinks Eric may be bleeding from his encounter with Jack's fire-stealers.

### ***The littlun with the mulberry-marked face***

Otherwise unidentified except as a distant relative of Henry, this littlun was noticed immediately after the boys came on the island; he is the first boy to mention seeing a "snake-thing," a "beastie [who] came in the dark." He is not seen after the fire got out of control. He is therefore the focus of much anxiety, especially among Ralph's group, which had tried to make a special point of looking after the littluns.

### ***Percival Wemys Madison***

Percival Wemys Madison, of the Vicarage, Harcourt St. Anthony, Hants, as he has been taught to introduce himself, is "mouse-colored and had not been very attractive even to his mother." Along

with Johnny, Percival is the smallest littlun. When Ralph and Piggy are trying to seek a rational explanation for Phil's dream of having seen and fought with "twisty things in the trees," they call on Percival as someone who was supposed to have been up that night and who might have been mistaken for the fearful thing that has so terrorized the littluns. But Percival's mere recitation of his name and address is enough to set off sad memories of his former life. His wails, along with his speculation that the beast comes from the sea, soon set off the other littluns on similar crying jags.

### ***Maurice***

One of the "biguns," he is next in size to Jack among the choir boys. Like most of the boys, he is a mixture of potentially good and bad traits. Which traits are developed depends on how strong the call of society and law is over the powers of darkness and savagery. In the beginning Maurice is helpful by suggesting that the boys use green branches on the fire to make smoke. He also makes the "littluns" forget their sorrow by pretending to fall off the twister log and making them laugh. Like Piggy, Maurice wants to believe that the world is a scientific place where human fears can be explained and needs can be met. Yet Maurice, who "of all the boys ... was the most at home" on the island, is still fearful that "we don't know [about the beast], do we? Not certainly, I mean...." Giving in to his fears, Maurice joins Roger in asserting his power by kicking over the littluns' sand castles. He also suggests adding a drum to the mock pig-killing ritual. Maurice's capitulation to his repressive leanings is complete when he defects to Jack and helps him steal fire from Piggy and Ralph.

### ***Jack Merridew***

Jack would have preferred to be called Merridew, his last name, rather than a "kid name." This attitude may suggest the "simple arrogance" that causes Jack to propose himself for chief. After all, he exclaims, "I'm chapter chorister and head boy." (The rough American equivalents of these positions might be president of the glee club and head of the student council.) It's true that Jack has the advantage of being tall; his direction of the choir is another sign of an "obvious leader." As a political animal, however, Jack recognizes that choir conducting won't get him far on a deserted island. His decision to turn the choir into a group of hunters with himself as leader shows that he can be a wily strategist. In other ways, however, Jack is careless and destructive, as when he accidentally steps on

Piggy's glasses and breaks a lens. Similarly, Jack becomes so fixated with hunting that he neglects the fire, which goes out before the boys can signal a passing ship. Nevertheless, Jack is successful in daring Ralph to come with him to hunt the mysterious beast when darkness is falling. On that hunt Jack and Ralph, joined by Roger, perceive through the falling darkness the dim, shrouded figure of the dead parachutist—an image of the adult world that suggests the destruction of the rational society envisioned by Ralph and Piggy.

As Ralph's civilized world disintegrates, Jack's savage society becomes more distinct and powerful. Jack separates his group from Ralph's when the group fails to dethrone Ralph and recognize Jack as leader. Then Jack sets about wooing away the other boys to his group. One way is by inviting everyone to a pig roast. Another is by painting his hunters' bodies and masking their faces, thus turning them into an anonymous mob of fighters who can wound and kill without fear of being singled out as guilty. Significantly, it is Jack who is the first of the older boys to see the possibility of the beast's existence, and ultimately the ways to use the fear of the beast to his advantage: as a motivation for hunting, and as a means of keeping the littluns under his control. When Simon seeks to expose the beast as just a "dead man on a hill," he is killed by Jack's group.

With Jack's successful theft of Piggy's last glass lens, the hunters' raid on Ralph and Piggy's fire, the capture and defection of Sam and Eric, and finally Piggy's death, as engineered by Jack and Roger, the "savages'" power is almost absolute. Only the intervention of adult society, represented by the British captain, is able to save Ralph from being killed and to reduce Jack to embarrassed silence at his failure to harness the powers of evil.

### Phil

One of the more self-confident littluns, Phil straightforwardly describes his dream of the "twisty things" when requested by Piggy.

### Piggy

Piggy is an intelligent and rational boy whose excess weight and asthma often make him the butt of the others' jokes. Yet because of his scientific approach to problems, Piggy is a voice of reason without whom Ralph's leadership would have been undermined far sooner. It is Piggy who not only recognizes the significance of the conch but whose spectacles enable Ralph to start the fire, whose smoke is their only chance of being saved. It is

## Media Adaptations



- *Lord of the Flies* enjoys the unusual status of being one of the few serious contemporary novels to have been made into a movie twice. The first, directed by Peter Brook in 1963 with an all-English cast, as has been described as "compelling," but was only moderately successful at the box office. Available from Home Vision Cinema and Fusion Video.
- The remake in 1990 featured an American cast and was directed by Harry Hook. While well-photographed and "visceral," with R-rated content, it is generally regarded as inferior to Brooks's version. Available from Columbia Tristar Home Video, The Video Catalog, and New Line Home Video.
- An 89-minute sound recording on cassette (JRH 109), book, and study guide, produced in 1984 and featuring excerpts from the novel, are available from the Listening Library, Old Greenwich, CT.

Piggy who realizes that building the shelters is at least as important for their long-term survival as keeping the fire going. It is Piggy whose understanding of the depths of Jack's hatred for Ralph forces Ralph to confront his despair at their prospects for getting along. And it is Piggy who makes the brilliant, however simple, suggestion that the fire be moved down to the beach away from the "beast from air."

For all his intellectual powers, however, Piggy is basically ineffectual without Ralph. Piggy is a man of thought, not of action, and he is physically weak because of his asthma. Without his spectacles, he is blind and helpless. After Jack has broken one lens from his glasses and stolen the other, Piggy is doomed in a society where irrational fears and physical strength are more respected than science, law, and dialogue. It is significant that Piggy and the conch are both destroyed at the same time by a huge rock rolled down a cliff by Roger, who

has been freed by Jack from the "taboo of the old life ... the protection of parents and school and policemen and the law" to unleash his savage instincts. Of all the children, Piggy is the most adult in his appearance, behavior, and beliefs. His thinning hair, which never seems to grow, and his frequent appeals to "what grownups would do" suggest his maturity and wisdom. In the closing lines of the book, Ralph weeps not only for "the end of innocence, the darkness of man's heart," but for "the fall through the air of the true, wise friend called Piggy."

### Ralph

The fair-haired, tall, handsome Ralph is an obvious choice to lead the band of children stranded on the island. He has a "directness" in his manner that the narrator calls a sign of "genuine leadership." As E. M. Forster describes Ralph in an introduction to one of novel's editions, he is "sunny and decent, sensible and considerate." He seems to be genuinely interested in the welfare of the entire group and can get along with all kinds of people. Perhaps he gets his sense of natural authority from his father, a commander in the Navy. He also has above-average powers of observation. He is the first to see the conch shell buried in the sand, though it is significant that it is Piggy who points out how it can be used as a signaling device.

In fact, Ralph is far from the ideal leader, and certainly far from the idealized Ralph in *The Coral Island*, R. M. Ballantyne's romantic children's story for which Golding intended his book to be a reality check. Ralph lacks the charisma and strategic skills to get the other boys to recognize what the conch represents—order, authority, dialogue, democracy. These are the qualities that are necessary if the group is to keep its signal fire going long enough to attract a passing ship. Golding often notes the "shutter" or cloud that sometimes comes over Ralph's mind when he is addressing the group and that prevents him from finding the right word to get their attention or galvanize them to action. This cloud of imperfection makes Ralph a kind of everyman with whom we can each identify, but it contributes to the gradual descent of the boys into a savagery to which Ralph himself succumbs by the end of the story.

### Robert

Like Simon and Maurice, Robert is one of the medium-sized boys on the lower end of the biguns' spectrum. In the stripped-down world of the island where the physical assumes more weight, Robert

finds his niche guarding Castle Rock. Robert is more comfortable taking orders than giving them. The one time he takes any initiative, pretending to be the pig in a ritual game, he is quickly reduced to a sniveling child. He also serves with Jack and Maurice on the committee that welcomes Ralph's group to Jack's feast.

### Roger

Just as Piggy represents Ralph's best quality, his attempts to act mature, so Roger stands for Jack's worst characteristic, his lust for power over living things. Roger is first introduced as one of the biguns who "kept to himself with an inner intensity of avoidance and secrecy." While Piggy thinks about ways to be rescued, Roger is "gloomily" pessimistic about the group's chances. Acting on his darker impulses, at first in small ways, he knocks over Percival and Johnny's sand castles. Then he throws stones at Henry, only missing because his arm "was conditioned by a civilization that knew nothing of him and was in ruins." Once he sees how Jack's "dazzle paint" created a mask that "liberated him from shame and self-consciousness," however, it is only a matter of time before Roger comes under Jack's power. First we see him, along with Ralph and the rest, participate in the mock pig kill in celebration of the successful hunt. Then, not long after Jack secedes from the group, Roger follows him and is soon hunting pigs and offering to help Jack steal fire from Ralph's group. Though part of Roger still questions the irresponsibility of some of Jack's actions, like beating Wilfred, he nevertheless goes along with them. It is Roger who, "with a sense of delirious abandonment," finally releases the boulder from Castle Rock that kills Piggy and destroys the conch. And it is Roger who, "wielding a nameless authority," moves to detain Sam and Eric.

### Sam

See Samneric

### Samneric

As twins, the two always act together and indeed are often called Samneric as one unit. In the beginning Sam and Eric are especially helpful to Ralph, rekindling the fire on top of the mountain after it almost goes out. Even after being scared by the "beast from air," the twins do not desert Ralph, as Maurice and Roger do; instead the twins go with Piggy to gather fruit for their own feast. After attending Jack's pig roast, Sam and Eric return to Ralph and Piggy's shelters, the last "biguns" to re-



main loyal, though none will admit to the other that they were in any way involved in Simon's death. Finally Sam and Eric are captured by Jack's group while accompanying Piggy and Ralph to demand that Jack return Piggy's glasses. In the ensuing confrontation, Ralph attacks Jack and runs into the jungle, where his presence is then betrayed by the twins, who fear for their lives.

### **Simon**

Perhaps the most symbolic character in the story, Simon represents the religious prophet or seer who is sensitive and inarticulate yet who, of all the boys, perhaps sees reality most clearly. Simon's special powers are signaled early in the story when, even though he is not one of the bigger boys, he is chosen by Ralph to join him and Jack to explore the island. Among all the boys, it is Simon whose behavior is perhaps the most exemplary during the first part of the story. He is Ralph's faithful helper in building the shelters. Simon alone recognizes that "maybe [the beast is] only us" or just a "pig's head on a stick." Simon, for all his sensitivity and fears, knows that the only way to deal with fear is to face it. When no one else wants to climb back up the mountain after seeing the "beast from air," it is Simon who proposes just such a climb. "What else is there to do?" he reasons. And even after Simon imagines the beast telling him, with the "infinite cynicism of adult life," that "everything was a bad business," he answers, "I know that." Ralph's vision of how things are is all-too-human and clouded compared to Simon's, though Simon must periodically retreat to the candle-budded trees in the forest to restore and maintain this clearheadedness.

Yet even Simon faints with weakness and disgust after seeing the beast and imagining it saying, "You knew, didn't you? I'm part of you? ... I'm the reason why it's no go? Why things are what they are?" When confronted with the realization that he is isolated and cut off from the others in his special knowledge, and just as afraid to die as any of them, Simon begins to lose the vision that had made him a potential savior of the group.

What began as a ritual and make-believe killing of the pig as a way of celebrating a good hunt now becomes a real ritual murder. Simon, in an attempt to tell the others about his discovery of the "man on the hill," accidentally stumbles into a ring of littluns and is killed in the confusion. The shame that Ralph, Piggy, Sam, and Eric all feel the day after Simon's death, despite their attempts to ignore it, show that civilized values still have some

hold on them. Yet the incident marks an important turning point in the story, for it is the first time that the boys have deliberately killed one of their own.

## **Themes**

### ***Good and Evil***

During their abandonment on the island, Ralph, Piggy, Simon, and many of the other boys show elements of good in their characters. Ralph's calm "stillness," and his attentiveness to others' needs, make him a potentially good person. Good may be defined here as something just, virtuous, or kind that conforms to the moral order of the universe. Piggy's knowledge and belief in the power of science and rational thought to help people understand and thus control the physical world for their mutual benefit are also obviously a force for good. Simon, always ready to help out, sensitive to the power of evil but not afraid to stand up to it, is perhaps the strongest representative of the forces of good in the story.

Yet all of these characters ultimately fall victim to the forces of evil, as represented by the cruelties of the hunters, especially Jack and Roger. Piggy loses his glasses, and thus the power to make fire. This power, when controlled by the forces of reason, is a powerful tool for good: it warms the boys, cooks their food, and provides smoke for the rescue signals that are their only hope for survival. But in the hands of those with less skill and knowledge, the fire becomes an agent of destruction—first unintentionally in the hands of those who are ignorant of its powers, then purposefully when Jack and the hunters use it to smoke out and destroy their opponents. It is Simon's bad luck to stumble upon the feasting group of boys with his news about the "man on the hill" just as the group's ritual pig hunt is reaching its climax. Simon's ritual killing, to which Piggy and Ralph are unwitting yet complicit witnesses, is perhaps the decisive blow in the battle between the forces of good and evil. Later Piggy loses his life at the hand of the almost totally evil Roger, who has loosed the boulder from Castle Rock. Now, without Piggy's glasses and wise counsel and Simon's steadfastness, Ralph is greatly weakened, and to survive he must ultimately be rescued by adult society, represented by the British captain. It is important, however, to note that Jack, too, is defeated because he cannot control the forces of evil. It is Jack's order to use fire to destroy Ralph's hiding place that virtually destroys the is-



## Topics for Further Study



- Compare and contrast the attitudes of Piggy, Ralph, Jack, and Simon toward the environment, as shown in the novel. Argue whether there is or is not any hope for environmental conservation as illustrated in the story.
- Research the weather, plant and animal life, and ocean life of a tropical island in the Pacific Ocean. Imagine you have been abandoned on the island and write a week-long journal detailing how you would survive there.
- Research actual instances of groups of adults or children being abandoned in the wilderness. Compare the outcomes of these cases to the events that occur in *Lord of the Flies*.
- Read one of the inspirations for *Lord of the Flies*, R. M. Ballantyne's *The Coral Island*. Compare the characters and events of the two books, and argue which book you think portrays a more realistic outcome. Use examples from the text to support your argument.

land, although, ironically, it is the smoke from that fire that finally attracts the British ship and leads to the boys' rescue.

### Appearances and Reality

At several points in the story, Golding is at pains to stress the complexity of human life. During the novel, neither a firm grasp of reality (represented by Piggy's scientific bent and the island's ocean side) nor the comfort of illusions (seen in Ralph's daydreaming, Simon's silent communion with nature among the candlebush trees, and symbolized by the sleepy lagoon side of the island) is enough to save the boys from the forces of evil. The sun, which should represent life and the power of reason, can also be blinding. Yet darkness is no better, as can be seen when the littluns' fantasies and fears are only further distorted by nighttime shadows. This sense of complexity is perhaps best summed up by Ralph, speculating on how shadows

at different times of day change the appearance of things: "If faces were different when lit from above or below—what was a face? What was anything?" This comment can also relate to the power of the painted faces of Jack's hunters to remove the hunters from a sense of individual responsibility for their masked deeds.

### Reason and Emotion

Because of Golding's great interest in Greek and Roman mythology, this theme is sometimes summarized by critics as the conflict between the Apollonian and the Dionysian aspects of life. This refers to the Greek gods Apollo, the god of reason, and Dionysus, the god of wine and emotion. Most characters in the story show elements of both reason and emotion. Piggy, with his interest in science and fact, may seem to represent the life of reason, while Jack and the hunters may seem to represent the emotional side of life. To Golding, however, matters are not that simple. Just as in Greek mythology the grave of Dionysus is found within the temple of Apollo at Delphi, so in the story reason and emotion may battle with each other within the same character. Thus when Roger first throws rocks, his arm is conditioned by rational society to avoid hitting the littlun Henry. Later his emotions will overcome his reason and he will loose the boulder that kills Piggy. Sometimes Golding shows the struggle between reason and emotion using two characters, as when Ralph the daydreamer struggles to remember the rational ideas Piggy told him about rescue. In the end, reason, in the form of the British captain, seems to triumph over the runaway emotion that has led to the destruction of the island and at least two of its temporary inhabitants. But the reflective reader will remember that the world to which the captain will presumably be trying to return has, in fact, been destroyed by an atom bomb. This suggests that in the end the grand achievements of science, compounded with the irrational emotions of warring powers, may have spelled the doom of humanity.

### Morals and Morality

Golding himself has said that the writing of *Lord of the Flies* was "an attempt to trace the defects of society back to the defects of human nature." Golding sets a group of children, who should supposedly be closest to a state of innocence, alone on an island without supervision. In this fashion, he can test whether the defects of society lie in the form of society or in the individuals who create it. Ralph tries to maintain order and convince the boys

to work for the common good, but he can't overcome the selfishness of Jack and his hunters. By the time Piggy makes his plea for the return of his glasses—"not as a favor ... but because what's right's right"—Jack and his gang can no longer recognize a moral code where law and cooperation is best and killing is wrong. As the author once commented, "the moral is that the shape of a society must depend on the ethical nature of the individual and not on any political system."

## Style

### Point of View

All novels use at least one perspective, or point of view, from which to tell the story. This may consist of a point of view of no single character (the omniscient, or "all-knowing" point of view), a single character, multiple characters in turn, and combinations or variations on these. Golding uses the omniscient point of view, which enables him to stand outside and above the story itself, making no reference to the inner life of any of the individual characters. From this lofty point he comments on the action from the point of view of a removed, but observant, bystander. Golding has commented in interviews that the strongest emotion he personally feels about the story is grief. Nevertheless, as the narrator he makes a conscious decision, like the British captain at the end of the story, to "turn away" from the shaking and sobbing boys and remain detached. The narrator lets the actions, as translated through the artist's techniques of symbolism, structure, and so on, speak for themselves. Even so dramatic and emotional an event as Piggy's death is described almost clinically: "Piggy fell forty feet and landed on his back across that square red rock in the sea. His head opened and stuff came out and turned red."

### Symbolism

A symbol can be defined as a person, place, or thing that represents something more than its literal meaning. The conch shell, to take an obvious example in the story, stands for a society of laws in which, for example, people take their turn in speaking. The pig's head is a more complex example of a symbol. To Simon, and to many readers, it can have more than one meaning. On a rational level, Simon knows the pig's head is just that: a "pig's head on a stick." But on a more emotional level, Simon realizes that the pig's head represents an evil so strong that it has the power to make him

faint. When he thinks of the head as "The Lord of the Flies," the symbol becomes even more powerful, as this title is a translation of "Beelzebub," another name for the Devil. Similarly, the fire set by using Piggy's glasses, when controlled, could be said to represent science and technology at their best, serving humans with light and heat. When uncontrolled, however, fire represents science and technology run amok, killing living things and destroying the island. Simon himself can be said to symbolize Christ, the selfless servant who is always helping others but who dies because his message—that the scary beast on the hill is only a dead parachutist—is misunderstood. Throughout the story, the noises of the surf, the crackling fire, the boulders rolling down hills, and trees exploding from the fire's heat are often compared to the boom of cannons and drum rolls. In this way, Golding reminds us that the whole story is intended to repeat and symbolize the atomic war which preceded it.

### Setting

In the setting for *Lord of the Flies*, Golding has created his own "Coral Island"—an allusion, or literary reference, to a book of that name by R. M. Ballantyne. Using the same scenario of boys being abandoned on a tropical island, *The Coral Island* (1857) is a classic boys' romantic adventure story, like Johann Wyss's *The Swiss Family Robinson*, in which everyone has a great time and nobody dies or ends up unhappy. Golding, however, has quite different ideas, and he has used the setting in his story to reinforce those concepts. Yes, the island can be a wonderful place, as the littluns discover by day when they are bathing in the lagoon pool or eating fruit from the trees. But at night the same beach can be the setting for nightmares, as some boys fancy that they see "snake-things" in the trees.

Golding builds a similar contrast between the generally rocky side of the island that faces the sea, and the softer side that faces the lagoon. On the ocean side of the island, "the filmy enchantments of mirage could not endure the cold ocean water.... On the other side of the island, swathed at midday with mirage, defended by the shield of the quiet lagoon, one might dream of rescue; but here, faced by the brute obtuseness of the ocean ... one was helpless." Thus the setting reinforces Golding's view of human nature as a struggle of good intentions and positive concepts like love and faith against the harshness of nature and human failings like anger.

## Historical Context

### ***Golding and World War II***

“When I was young, before the war, I did have some airy-fairy views about man.... But I went through the war and that changed me. The war taught me different and a lot of others like me,” Golding told Douglas A. Davis in the *New Republic*. Golding was referring to his experiences as captain of a British rocket-launching craft in the North Atlantic, where he was present at the sinking of the *Bismarck*, crown ship of the German navy, and participated in the D-Day invasion of German-

occupied France. He was also directly affected by the devastation of England by the German air force, which severely damaged the nation’s infrastructure and marked the beginning of a serious decline in the British economy. Wartime rationing continued well into the postwar period. Items like meat, bread, sugar, gasoline, and tobacco were all in short supply and considered luxuries. To turn their country around, the government experimented with nationalization of key industries like coal, electric power, and gas companies as well as the transportation industry. Socialized medicine and government-sponsored insurance were also introduced. Such

## Compare & Contrast

- **1950s:** Economically, Great Britain was devastated by World War II. Homes, factories, railroads, docks, and other facilities had been destroyed by the German air force. Rationing of bread, meat, sugar, and gasoline continued well into the postwar period. Formerly a creditor, or lending nation, Great Britain for the first time in its history became a debtor nation.

**Today:** Great Britain has regained economic stability, though not the economic power it had enjoyed before World War II. The discovery of oil in the North Sea and membership in the European Union (despite occasional disagreements) have enhanced Great Britain's economic strength.

- **1950s:** Politically, Great Britain was ruled in the immediate post-World War II period by the Labor Party, under which basic industries like coal, electric power, gas, and transportation were nationalized, social security was expanded, and universal health care was made available. With the coming of the Cold War, Great Britain sided

with its World War II ally the United States against Russian expansionism, although a strong strain of antinuclear activism arose, centered around the placement of American nuclear missiles on British bases.

**Today:** Great Britain remains politically strong, though a separatist movement in Northern Ireland continues to cause unrest. With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War, Great Britain has been able to focus its energies more on domestic problems and regional cooperation.

- **1950s:** Biologically oriented psychologists like Arnold Gesell believe that a child's intellectual development is only marginally affected by environment, while other scientists argue that it plays a dominant role.

**Today:** Scientific studies using brain scans have shown physical differences between the brains of healthy children and abused children, suggesting experiences can actually change the circuitry of the brain.

changes, and the difficult conditions that produced them, suggest the climate of the postwar years in which Golding wrote *Lord of the Flies*.

### ***The Geography of a Tropical Island***

Although highly romanticized in both Western fiction and nonfiction, life on a typical tropical island is not all that easy. The weather is usually very hot and humid, and there is no breeze once one enters the jungle. While fish abound in the surrounding waters and the scent of tropical flowers wafts through the air, one must still watch out for sharks, and one cannot live on a diet of fruit and flowers. James Fahey, a naval seaman who served in the Pacific islands during the war, concluded: "We do not care too much for this place, the climate takes the life right out of you."

### ***The Political Climate of the 1950s***

The rise of the Cold War between the Soviet Union (U.S.S.R.) and the western powers after the end of World War II signaled a new phase in world geopolitics. Actual wars during the 1950s were confined to relatively small-scale conflicts, as in Korea (involving the United States) and Vietnam (involving the French). The nonviolent yet still threatening sabre-rattling between the USSR and the United States, however, reached a peak with the first successful hydrogen bomb test by the United States on November 1, 1952, at Eniwetok Atoll in the Pacific. A second device, hundreds of times more powerful than the atomic bombs dropped over Japan, was successfully detonated on March 1, 1954, at Bikini Atoll. In the United States, public fallout shelters were designated for large cities, al-

legedly to protect citizens from the rain of radioactive materials produced by such nuclear explosions. Schoolchildren practiced taking cover under their desks during regular air raid drills. Also in 1954, Canada and the United States agreed to build a "DEW" line (Distant Early Warning Line) of radar stations across the Arctic to warn of approaching aircraft or missiles over the Arctic. In short, the atmosphere of the first half of the 1950s was one of suspicion, distrust, and threats among the big powers. An atomic war on the scale that *Lord of Flies* suggested did not seem out of the realm of possibility during the early 1950s.

## Critical Overview

*Lord of the Flies* has attracted an immense amount of both favorable and unfavorable criticism. Most vehement among the latter critics are Kenneth Rexroth, whose essay in the *Atlantic Monthly* castigated the author for having written a typical "rigged" "thesis novel" whose characters "never come alive as real boys." In the same camp is Martin Green (1960), who criticizes Golding's early works, including *Lord of the Flies*, as "not importantly original in thought or feeling." Otherwise admiring critics like James R. Baker have claimed that the popularity of the book peaked by the end of the 1960s because of that decade's naive view of humanity and rejection of original sin.

Among critics who admire *Lord of the Flies*, there is remarkable disagreement about the book's influences, genre, significant characters, and theme, not to mention the general philosophy of the author. Frank Kermode's early essay, excerpts of which appear in Baker & Ziegler's casebook edition of the novel, examines R. M. Ballantyne's Victorian boys' adventure story *The Coral Island* as Golding's primary influence. He interprets Golding's book as a powerful story, capable of many interpretations, precisely because of the author's "mythopoeic power to transcend" his own allegorical "programme." Bernard F. Dick, while acknowledging *The Coral Island's* influence, builds on Kermode's observation that the book's strength is grounded in its mythic level by tracing the influence of the Greek dramatists, especially Euripides, whose play *The Bacchae* Golding himself acknowledged as an important source of his thinking. Dick notes that *The Bacchae* and *Lord of the Flies* both "portray a bipolar society in which the Apollonian [represented by Ralph] refuses or is unable

to assimilate the Dionysian [represented by the hunters]." Dick finds fault with the author's having profound thoughts come out of the mouths of children, especially Simon. The critic recognizes, however, that this flaw grew out of Golding's decision to model his characters on the children in *Coral Island*. Nevertheless Dick is an overall admirer of Golding's craft in producing a work whose "foundation ... is mythic" yet which is perhaps most accurately called a "serious parody."

Using a psychoanalytic approach to the novel, Claire Rosenfield (1961) finds yet another source for Golding's ideas in psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud's *Totem and Taboo*. Golding claimed in an interview that he had read "absolutely no Freud." Even so, Rosenfield's close reading argues that Golding must have been influenced, directly or indirectly, by Freudian ideas. Rosenfield reminds us that according to Freud, gods and devils are basically human processes projected into the outer world. Specifically, "Ralph is a projection of man's good impulses from which we derive the authority figures—whether god, king, or father.... Jack becomes an externalization of the evil instinctual forces of the unconscious." Piggy, whose knowledge of science, thinning hair, and respect for adults make him the most adultlike child on the island, is both a father figure and a symbol of the progressive degeneration of the boys from adults to animalistic savages.

The abundance of possible critical stances on *Lord of the Flies* is summarized by Patrick Reilly in his chapter "The Strife of Critics" from his study "*Lord of the Flies*": *Fathers and Sons*. Reilly notes that the book "has been read as a moral fable of personal disintegration, as a social fable of social regression, as a religious fable of the fall of man." One critic is sure that civilization is victorious in the book, while another scoffs at the very idea that the book ends happily.

Reilly himself puts Golding's work squarely in the tradition of the "dark epiphany" as used in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. Both authors work under the notion that man is so thoroughly corrupted that his redemption as a species is hopeless, however gallant and inspirational individual attempts may be. Thus the reader of Golding at the end of book is left wondering how, if the world has been destroyed by atomic war, the captain and his ship will be rescued after he has rescued the boys. Reilly, however, does find hope in the figure of Simon, whose slow death ennobles him as a "hero, saint, martyr," in contrast to Piggy's quick dispatch

and equally sudden disappearance. Thus the darkness within man as a whole in the story is balanced by the "brightness within" individual hearts, and Reilly concludes that "if we cannot be certain of salvation, perhaps it is enough to sustain us if we know that the darkness need not prevail."

## Criticism

### Diane Andrews Henningfeld

*Henningfeld is a professor at Adrian College. In the following essay, she explores how Golding's novel can be interpreted in a variety of different ways—including as political, psychological, and religious allegory.*

*Lord of the Flies*, William Golding's first novel, was published in London in 1954 and in New York in 1955. Golding was forty-three years old when he wrote the novel, having served in the Royal Navy during the Second World War. According to Bernard Oldsey, "The war appears to have been an important influence on him."

*Lord of the Flies* is deliberately modeled after R. M. Ballantyne's 1857 novel *The Coral Island*. In this story, a group of English boys are shipwrecked on a tropical island. They work hard together to save themselves. The only evil in the book is external and is personified by a tribe of cannibals that live on the island. The book offers a Victorian view of the world: through hard work and earnestness, one can overcome any hardship.

By giving his characters the same names as those in Ballantyne's book and by making direct reference to *The Coral Island* in the text of *Lord of the Flies*, Golding clearly wants readers to see his book as a response to the Victorian world view. Golding's view is a much bleaker one: the evil on the island is internal, not external. At the end of the book, the adult naval officer who invokes *The Coral Island* almost serves as Ballantyne's voice: "I should have thought that a pack of British boys—you're all British, aren't you?—would have been able to put up a better show than that." Golding's understanding of the world, colored by his own experiences in World War II, is better represented by Ralph's weeping "for the end of innocence, the darkness of man's heart, and the fall through the air of the true, wise friend called Piggy."

Initially, critics commented less on the novel as a work of art than on its political, religious, and psychological symbolism. For example, James Stern in a 1955 review for *The New York Times*

## What Do I Read Next?



- Euripides's ancient Greek tragedy *The Bacchae*, (405 BC), whose influence on *Lord of the Flies* is widely acknowledged, dramatizes the influence of the worship of Dionysus on the city of Thebes. In the play, King Pentheus tries to stop the Bacchantes' Dionysian ceremony and as a result is taken for a wild animal and killed by his mother.
- Just as *Lord of the Flies* is a post-World War II response to R. M. Ballantyne's *The Coral Island*, so Golding's next novel, *The Inheritors* (1955), is a realistic response to H. G. Wells's optimistic theory of history as propounded in his *Outline of History*.
- *Animal Farm* by George Orwell (1945), like *Lord of the Flies*, is an allegory influenced by its author's war experiences, and one that probes the nature of man and his attempts to form a just society.
- The view of man and society in J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* (1951), in which a psychologically convalescing young man looks back on his experiences, has often been contrasted with the perspective of Golding's novel, and both books have been campus favorites at different times.
- Praised for its style of its prose, Marianne Wiggins's 1989 novel *John Dollar* has been described as a "girl's version" of *Lord of the Flies*. Set in the 1910s, the novel follows a group of girls and their blinded schoolmistress who are stranded on an island near Burma after a storm.

*Book Review* wrote "*Lord of the Flies* is an allegory on human society today, the novel's primary implication being that what we have come to call civilization is at best no more than skin deep."

Indeed, many critics have argued that *Lord of the Flies* is an allegory. An allegory is a story in which characters, setting, objects, and plot stand

for a meaning outside of the story itself. Frequently, the writers of allegory illustrate an abstract meaning by the use of concrete images. For example, George Orwell, in *Animal Farm*, uses animals and the barnyard as concrete representations of the Russian Revolution. Often, characters in allegories personify some abstract quality. In the medieval drama *Everyman*, for instance, the concrete character Everyman stands for all of humanity.

While it is possible to read *Lord of the Flies* as allegory, the work is so complex that it can be read as allegorizing the political state of the world in the postwar period; as a Freudian psychological understanding of human kind; or as the Christian understanding of the fall of humankind, among others.

As a political allegory, each character in *Lord of the Flies* represents some abstract idea of government. Ralph, for example, stands for the good-hearted but not entirely effective leader of a democratic state, a ruler who wants to rule by law derived from the common consent. Piggy is his adviser, someone who is unable to rule because of his own social and physical shortcomings, but who is able to offer sound advice to the democratic leader. Jack, on the other hand, represents a totalitarian dictator, a ruler who appeals to the emotional responses of his followers. He rules by charisma and hysteria. Roger, the boy who takes the most joy in the slaughter of the pigs and who hurls the rock that kills Piggy, represents the henchman necessary for such a totalitarian ruler to stay in power.

Such a reading takes into account the state of the world at the end of the World War II. For many years, leaders such as British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt led democratic countries against totalitarian demigods such as Germany's Adolf Hitler and Italy's Benito Mussolini. Further, in the early 1950s, the world appeared to be divided into two camps: the so-called Free World of Western Europe and the United States, and the so-called Iron Curtain world of communist eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. At the time of the writing of *Lord of the Flies*, the world appeared to be teetering on the brink of total nuclear annihilation. Thus, by taking into account the historical context of *Lord of the Flies*, it is possible to understand the work as political and historical allegory, even as a cautionary tale for the leaders of the world.

Freudian psychological critics, on the other hand, are able to read *Lord of the Flies* as an allegory of the human psychology. In such a reading,

each of the characters personifies a different aspect of the human psyche: the id, the super ego, and the ego. According to Freud, the id (located in the unconscious mind) works always to gratify its own impulses. These impulses, often sexual, seek to provide pleasure without regard to the cost. Jack's impulse to hunt and kill reaches its peak with the killing of the sow pig, a killing rife with sexual overtones. Jack never considers anything but his own pleasure; thus he can be considered an allegorical representation of the id. The superego is the part of the mind that seeks to control the impulsive behavior of the id. It acts as an internal censor. In *Lord of the Flies*, Piggy serves this role. He constantly reminds Ralph of their need to keep the fire burning and to take proper responsibility for the littluns. By so doing, he urges Ralph to control Jack. Piggy understands that Jack hates him, because he stands between Jack and his achievement of pleasure. Further, just as the superego must employ the ego to control the id, Piggy cannot control Jack on his own; he must rely on Ralph to do so. Finally, the ego is the conscious mind whose role it is to mediate between the id's demand for pleasure and the social pressures brought to bear by the superego. Freud calls this mediation process the reality principal; that is, the notion that immediate pleasure must be denied in order to avoid painful or deadly consequences. Ralph clearly fills this role. He attempts to control Jack and engage his energy for the tending of the fire. To do so requires him to put off the pleasure of the hunt in order to secure rescue. In a Freudian reading of *The Lord of the Flies*, Golding seems to be saying that without the reinforcement of social norms, the id will control the psyche.

Finally, it is possible to read *Lord of the Flies* as a religious allegory. In such a reading, the tropical island, filled with fruit and everything needed for sustenance, becomes a symbol of the Garden of Eden. The initial identification of the beastie as a snake also brings to mind the story of the Fall of Man. Indeed, it is possible to read the fall of the parachutist as the event which leads to the ouster from Eden of the boys. Further, Jack's identification with hunting and Ralph's identification with shelter as well as their natural antagonism appear to be allegorization of the Cain and Abel story. Indeed, it is only the intercession of the adult who comes looking for them which saves Ralph from murder. Many critics have attempted to read Simon as a Christ figure; he is the one boy who has the true knowledge which can save them. Like Christ, he is martyred. Unlike Christ, however, his death



seems to have no significance for the boys; his knowledge dies with him.

More recently, critics have recognized the technical and artistic skill exhibited by Golding in *Lord of the Flies*. Especially notable is the way in which Golding fuses allegorical structure with strong, realistic descriptions, well-developed characterizations, and a coherent, fast moving plot. The description of the death of Piggy, for example, demonstrates Golding's skill with realistic, graphic prose:

The rock struck Piggy a glancing blow from chin to knee; the conch exploded into a thousand white fragments and ceased to exist. Piggy, saying nothing, with no time for even a grunt, traveled through the air sideways from the rock, turning over as he went. The rock bounded twice and was lost in the forest. Piggy fell forty feet and landed on his back across the square red rock in the sea. His head opened and stuff came out and turned red. Piggy's arms and legs twitched a bit, like a pig's after it has been killed. Then the sea breathed again in a long, slow sigh, the water boiled white and pink over the rock; and when it went, sucking back again, the body of Piggy was gone.

Golding also provides strong characterizations. While it is possible to see each boy fulfilling an allegorical role, none of the characters (with the possible exception of Simon) functions solely as part of the allegory. This can perhaps best be seen in the development of Jack. During the first trip into the jungle, he is unable to kill the pig with his knife; by the end of the book he is hunting human quarry. Jack's growth from choirboy to murderer is accomplished with great skill.

Finally, Golding writes a fast-moving, suspenseful adventure story. The book moves quickly from the first days on the beach to the final hunt scene, reaching a feverish pitch that is broken abruptly by the appearance of the naval officer, just as it appears that Ralph will be killed. While the appearance of the adult, however, closes the action, it does not provide us with a happy ending. Indeed, at the moment of the climax of the adventure story, Golding suddenly reminds us of the allegorical nature of the book: the naval officer's cruiser is a weapon of war. Although we feel relief over Ralph's rescue, we suddenly understand that the adult world is little different from the world of the island, a place where men hunt and kill each other indiscriminately, a place where men can blow up the entire planet, our island in the sea of the universe.

**Source:** Diane Andrews Henningfeld, in an essay for *Novels for Students*, Gale, 1997.

## Paul Slayton

*In the following excerpt, Slayton finds Lord of the Flies to be a parable about modern civilization and human morality, and describes Golding's literary techniques.*

*Lord of the Flies* is William Golding's parable of life in the latter half of the twentieth century, the nuclear age, when society seems to have reached technological maturity while human morality is still prepubescent. Whether or not one agrees with the pessimistic philosophy, the idiocentric psychology or the fundamentalist theology espoused by Golding in the novel, if one is to use literature as a "window on the world," this work is one of the panes through which one should look.

The setting for *Lord of the Flies* is in the literary tradition of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Johann Wyss's *The Swiss Family Robinson*, and like these earlier works provides the necessary ingredients for an idyllic utopian interlude. A plane loaded with English school boys, aged five through twelve, is being evacuated to a safe haven in, perhaps, Australia to escape the "Reds," with whom the English are engaged in an atomic war. Somewhere in the tropics the plane is forced to crash land during a violent storm. All the adults on board are lost when the forward section of the plane is carried out to sea by tidal waves. The passenger compartment, fortuitously, skids to a halt on the island, and the young passengers escape uninjured.

The boys find themselves in a tropical paradise: bananas, coconuts and other fruits are profusely available. The sea proffers crabs and occasional fish in tidal pools, all for the taking. The climate is benign. Thus, the stage is set for an idyllic interlude during which British fortitude will enable the boys to master any possible adversity. In fact, Golding relates that just such a nineteenth century novel, R. M. Ballantyne's *Coral Island*, was the inspiration for *Lord of the Flies*. In that utopian story the boy castaways overcame every obstacle they encountered with the ready explanation, "We are British, you know!"

Golding's tropical sojourners, however, do not "live happily ever after." Although they attempt to organize themselves for survival and rescue, conflicts arise as the boys first neglect, then refuse, their assigned tasks. As their "society" fails to build shelters or to keep the signal fire going, fears emanating from within—for their environment is totally non-threatening—take on a larger than life reality. Vines hanging from trees become "snake

things" in the imaginings of the "little'uns." A nightmare amidst fretful sleep, causing one of the boys to cry out in the night, conjures up fearful "beasties" for the others. Their fears become more real than existence on the tropical paradise itself when the twins, Sam 'n Eric, report their enervating experience with the wind-tossed body of the dead parachutist. Despite Simon's declaration that "there is no beast, it's only us," and Piggy's disavowal of "ghosts and things," the fear of the unknown overcomes their British reserve and under Jack's all-too-willing chieftainship the boys' retreat from civilization begins.

In the initial encounter with a pig, Jack is unable to overcome his trained aversion to violence to even strike a blow at the animal. Soon, however, he and his choirboys-turned-hunters make their first kill. They rationalize that they must kill the animals for meat. The next step back from civilization occurs and the meat pretext is dropped; the real objective is to work their will on other living things.

Then, killing begins to take on an even more sinister aspect. The first fire the boys build to attract rescuers roars out of control and one of the younger boys is accidentally burned to death. The next death, that of Simon, is not an accident. He is beaten to death when he rushes into the midst of the ritual dance of the young savages. Ironically, he has come to tell the boys that he has discovered that the beast they fear is not real. Then Piggy, the last intellectual link with civilization, is killed on impulse by the sadistic Roger. Last, all semblance of civilized restraint is cast-off as the now-savage tribe of boys organizes itself to hunt down and kill their erstwhile leader, Ralph, who had tried desperately to prepare them to carry on in the fashion expected of upper middle-class British youth.

That Golding intended *Lord of the Flies* as a paradigm for modern civilization is concretely evident at the conclusion of the work. During the final confrontation at the rock fort between Ralph and Piggy and Jack and his tribe, the reader readily forgets that these individuals in conflict are not adults. The manhunt for Ralph, too, seems relative only to the world of adults. The reader is so inclined to lose sight of the age of his characters that Golding must remind that these participants are pre-adolescents: The naval officer who interrupts the deadly manhunt sees "A semicircle of little boys, their bodies streaked with colored clay, sharp sticks in hand...." Unlike that officer, the reader knows that it was not "fun and games" of the boys that the naval officer interrupted. The officer does

not realize—as the reader knows—that he has just saved Ralph from a sacrificial death and the other boys from becoming premeditated murderers. Neither is the irony of the situation very subtle: The boys have been "rescued" by an officer from a British man-of-war, which will very shortly resume its official activities as either hunter or hunted in the deadly adult game of war.

Golding, then, in *Lord of the Flies* is asking the question which continues as the major question haunting the world today: How shall denizens of the earth be rescued from our fears and our own pursuers—ourselves? While Golding offers no ready solutions to our dilemma, an understanding of his parable yields other questions which may enable readers to become seekers in the quest for a moral world. Even if one disagrees with Golding's judgment of the nature of human beings and of human society, one profits from his analysis of the problems confronting people today....

Golding is a master at his trade and *Lord of the Flies* has achieved critical acclaim as the best of his works. Indeed, a dictionary of literary terminology might well be illustrated with specific examples from this piece of prose. The development of the several focal characters in this work is brilliantly and concretely done. In addition, the omniscient narrative technique, plotting, relating story to setting and the use of irony, foreshadowing, and certainly, symbolism are so carefully and concretely accomplished that the work can serve as an invaluable teaching aid to prepare students to read other literature with a degree of understanding far beyond a simplistic knowledge of the surface events of the story. Golding's characterizations will be used in this rationale to illustrate these technical qualities of the novel.

A strength of *Lord of the Flies* lies in techniques of characterization. There are five major characters who are developed as wholly-rounded individuals whose actions and intensity show complex human motivation: Ralph, Jack, Roger, Simon and Piggy. A study of these characterizations shows the wide range of techniques for developing persona utilized by Golding and by other authors:

*Ralph*, the protagonist, is a rather befuddled everyman. He is chosen for leadership by the group for all the wrong reasons. Ralph does not seek the leadership role; he is elected because he is older (12 plus), somewhat larger, is attractive in personal appearance and, most strikingly, he possesses the conch shell which reminds the boys of the megaphone with which their late adult supervisors di-

rected and instructed them. In the unsought leadership role Ralph demonstrates courage, intelligence and some diplomatic skill. On the negative side he quickly becomes disillusioned with the democratic process and without Piggy's constant urgings would have cast aside the chief's role even before Jack's *coup d'etat*. Ralph also demonstrates other weaknesses as he unthinkingly gives away Piggy's hated nickname and, more significantly, he gets caught up in the mob psychology of the savage dance and takes part in the ritualistic murder of Simon. Thus, by relating causes and effects, Golding reveals Ralph's change from a proper British lad to group leader to his disenchantment and finally to his becoming the object of the murderous hunt by the boys who once chose him as their leader.

Jack, the antagonist, is developed as the forceful villain. Outgoing, cocky and confident, Jack marches his choir boys in military formation up the beach to answer the call of the conch. Jack is a natural leader who, except for his exploitative nature, might have been a congealing force for good. Instead, his lust for power precipitates the conflict with Ralph and Piggy's long-range planning for rescue. To attain leadership, Jack caters to boyish desires for ready delights and after he is assured that his choir boys will follow in this new direction, he resorts to intimidation to increase his following. In Jack, Golding has developed a prototype of the charismatic leader who gains adherents by highlighting the fears and fulfilling the ephemeral needs and desires of followers.

Roger, "the hangman's horror," is a stereotyped character who does not change. He readily sheds a thin veneer of civilization which has been imposed upon him by the authority of the policeman and the law. So easily his arm loses the restraints which had once prohibited him from hitting the littl'uns with tossed rocks to a point where he can kill Piggy on impulse. It is but one more small step for him to proclaim the ritual dance must end in killing and to premeditate the murder of Ralph.

Simon is the quintessential Christ-figure. A thin, frail little boy, subject to fainting spells, he alone has the mental acumen and the courage to go onto the mountain and disprove the existence of the "beast." He is martyred for his efforts by the group which no longer wishes to hear his "good news."

Piggy, the pragmatic intellectual, is of necessity the most steadfast in motivation. He is tied to civilization by his physical weaknesses. Over-

weight, asthmatic, and completely dependent for sight upon his spectacles, the life of the happy savage has no allure for him. Without the aids of civilization, such as eye glasses and allergy shots, he cannot long survive. Consequently, he must reject the ephemeral allures offered by Jack and steadfastly hold, and seek to hold Ralph, to maintaining the smoke signal, his only hope for the aid and succor of rescue. His steadfastness in this aim enables him to call up the uncharacteristic courage to make the last appeal to Jack and his tribe before the rock fort because "right is right." His plea is to no avail; the sadistic Roger releases the boulder which throws Piggy from the cliff to his death.

Another minor character, Percival Weems Botts, is developed as a stereotype to demonstrate the fragility of rote learning. This "little'un" who can only recite his name and address as a response soon forgets even that as all trappings of civilization are lost by the boys.

Thus, Golding's techniques of characterization afford superior examples of the writer's craft and apt material to use to help students learn to interpret authorial voice and to respond to a piece of literature as a level beyond the denotative.

*Lord of the Flies* has earned for itself and its author great critical acclaim. It has also been extolled by teachers for the excitement it can engender in readers and as a work in which the motivation of characters is readily understood by adolescent readers. Despite these accolades for the novel as a work of literary art and as a teaching tool, *Lord of the Flies* has on occasion aroused the ire of would-be censors.

Some have opposed the use of the novel in the classroom because of the use of "vulgar" language. Certain words, notably "sucks," "ass," and the British slang word "bloody," are used. It is patently obvious that there is no prurient motivation behind the author's choice of these words. Not one of these words is ever used outside of a context in which the word appears to be quite naturally the word the character would use. The choir boys may well sing like "angels," as is stated; nevertheless, these are perfectly normal pre-adolescent boys. Given the proclivities of such youth the world over, verisimilitude would be lost had they, amongst themselves, always spoken like angels.

The sexual symbolism of the killing of the sow has also raised some puritanical brows. This violent scene is described in terms which might well be used to describe a rape. Such symbolism is fully justified, however, if the author is to be allowed to

make his point that the motivation of the boys, casting away the cloak of civilization, is no longer merely securing food. Rather, they have moved from serving practical needs to an insane lust for working their will upon other creatures. The next step is the slaughter of their own kind.

Objection, too, has come upon that very point: children killing children. One must remind those who object to this violence that this piece of literature is a parable. Children are specifically used to show that even the innocence of childhood can be corrupted by fears from within. Those who would deny Golding this mode of establishing his theme would deny to all authors the right to make their point in an explicit fashion.

The most vociferous denunciation of *Lord of the Flies* has been vocalized by those who have misread the book to the point that they believe it deals with Satanism. The symbolism of the title, which is the English translation of the Greek word "Beelzebub," is surely being misinterpreted by such folk. In fact, theologian Davis Anderson states unequivocally that "Golding is a Christian writer." Anderson defines the central theme of *Lord of the Flies* as a statement of what it is like to experience the fall from innocence into sin and to experience damnation. Thus, a theologian sees the novel as one dealing with the Christian doctrine of original sin and of the rupture of man's relationship with God! Consequently, one who would attack this novel as an exercise in Satanism assuredly holds an indefensible premise.

**Source:** Paul Slayton, "Teaching Rationale for William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*," in *Censored Books: Critical Viewpoints*, Nicholas J. Karolides, Lee Burrell, John M. Kean, eds., The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1993, pp. 351-57.

### Carl Niemeyer

*In the following excerpt, Niemeyer compares Lord of the Flies to an earlier, utopian British children's novel, The Coral Island.*

One interested in finding about Golding for oneself should probably begin with *Lord of the Flies*.... The story is simple. In a way not clearly explained, a group of children, all boys, presumably evacuees in a future war, are dropped from a plane just before it is destroyed, on to an uninhabited tropical island. The stage is thus set for a reworking of a favorite subject in children's literature: castaway children assuming adult responsibilities without adult supervision. Golding expects his readers to recall the classic example of such a book, R. M. Ballantyne's *The Coral Island*

(1857), where the boys rise to the occasion and behave as admirably as would adults. But in *Lord of the Flies* everything goes wrong from the beginning. A few boys representing sanity and common sense, led by Ralph and Piggy, see the necessity for maintaining a signal fire to attract a rescue. But they are thwarted by the hunters, led by red-haired Jack, whose lust for blood is finally not to be satisfied by killing merely wild pigs. Only the timely arrival of a British cruiser saves us from an ending almost literally too horrible to think about. Since Golding is using a naive literary form to express sophisticated reflections on the nature of man and society, and since he refers obliquely to Ballantyne many times throughout the book, a glance at *The Coral Island* is appropriate.

Ballantyne shipwrecks his three boys—Jack, eighteen; Ralph, the narrator, aged fifteen; and Peterkin Gay, a comic sort of boy, aged thirteen—somewhere in the South Seas on an uninhabited coral island. Jack is a natural leader, but both Ralph and Peterkin have abilities valuable for survival. Jack has the most common sense and foresight, but Peterkin turns out to be a skillful killer of pigs, and Ralph when later in the book he is temporarily separated from his friends and alone on a schooner, coolly navigates it back to Coral Island by dead reckoning, a feat sufficiently impressive, if not quite equal to Captain Bligh's. The boys' life on the island is idyllic; and they are themselves without malice or wickedness, though there are a few curious episodes in which Ballantyne seems to hint at something he himself understands as little as do his characters. One is Peterkin's wanton killing of an old sow, useless as food, which the boy rationalizes by saying he needs leather for shoes. This and one or two other passages suggest that Ballantyne was aware of some darker aspects of boyish nature, but for the most part he emphasizes the paradisiacal life of the happy castaways. Like Golding's, however, Ballantyne's story raises the problem of evil, but whereas Golding finds evil in the boys' own natures, it comes to Ballantyne's boys not from within themselves but from the outside world. Tropical nature, to be sure, is kind, but the men of this non-Christian world are bad. For example, the island is visited by savage cannibals, one canoeing pursuing another, who fight a cruel and bloody battle, observed by the horrified boys, and then go away. A little later the island is again visited, this time by pirates (i.e., white men who have renounced or scorned their Christian heritage), who succeed in capturing Ralph. In due time the pirates are deservedly destroyed, and in the final episode

of the book the natives undergo an unmotivated conversion to Christianity, which effects a total change in their nature just in time to rescue the boys from their clutches.

Thus Ballantyne's view of man is seen to be optimistic, like his view of English boys' pluck and resourcefulness, which subdues tropical islands as triumphantly as England imposes empire and religion on lawless breeds of men. Golding's naval officer, the *deus ex machina* of *Lord of the Flies*, is only echoing Ballantyne when, perceiving dimly that all has not gone well on the island, he says: "I should have thought that a pack of British boys—you're all British aren't you?—would have been able to put up a better show than that—I mean—"

This is not the only echo of the older book. Golding boldly calls his two chief characters Jack and Ralph. He reproduces the comic Peterkin in the person of Piggy. He has a wanton killing of a wild pig, accomplished, as E. L. Epstein points out, "in terms of sexual intercourse." He uses a storm to avert a quarrel between Jack and Ralph, as Ballantyne used a hurricane to rescue his boys from death at the hands of cannibals. He emphasizes physical cruelty but integrates it into his story, and by making it a real if deplorable part of human, or at least boyish, nature improves on Ballantyne, whose descriptions of brutality—never of course performed by the boys—are usually introduced merely for their sensational effect. Finally, on the last page Golding's officer calls Ralph mildly to task for not having organized things better.

"It was like that at first," said Ralph, "before things—"

He stopped.

"We were together then—"

The officer nodded helpfully.

"I know. Jolly good show. Like the Coral Island."

Golding invokes Ballantyne, so that the kind but uncomprehending adult, the instrument of salvation, may recall to the child who has just gone through hell, the naiveté of the child's own early innocence, now forever lost; but he suggests at the same time the inadequacy of Ballantyne's picture of human nature in primitive surroundings.

Golding, then, regards Ballantyne's book as a badly falsified map of reality, yet the only map of this particular reality that many of us have. Ralph has it and, through harrowing experiences, replaces it with a more accurate one. The naval officer, though he should know better, since he is on the scene and should not have to rely on memories of his boyhood reading, has it, and it seems unlikely

that he is ever going to alter it, for his last recorded action is to turn away from the boys and look at his "trim" cruiser, in other words to turn away from a revelation of the untidy human heart to look at something manufactured, manageable, and solidly useful.

Golding, who being a grammar-school teacher should know boys well, gives a corrective of Ballantyne's optimism. As he has explained, the book is "an attempt to trace the defects of society back to the defects of human nature." These defects turn out, on close examination, to result from the evil of inadequacy and mistakenness. Evil is not the positive and readily identifiable force it appears to be when embodied in Ballantyne's savages and pirates. Golding's Ralph, for example, has real abilities, most conspicuous among them the gift of leadership and a sense of responsibility toward the "littluns." Yet both are incomplete. "By now," writes Golding, "Ralph had no self-consciousness in public thinking but would treat the day's decisions as though he were playing chess." Such detachment is obviously an important and valuable quality in a leader, but significantly the next sentence reads: "The only trouble was that he would never be a very good chess player." Piggy on the other hand no doubt would have been a good chess player, for with a sense of responsibility still more acute than Ralph's he combines brains and common sense. Physically, however, he is ludicrous—fat, asthmatic, and almost blind without his specs. He is forever being betrayed by his body. At his first appearance he is suffering from diarrhoea; his last gesture is a literally brainless twitch of the limbs, "like a pig's after it has been killed." His further defect is that he is powerless, except as he works through Ralph. Though Piggy is the first to recognize the value of the conch and even shows Ralph how to blow it to summon the first assembly, he cannot sound it himself. And he lacks imagination. Scientifically minded as he is, he scorns what is intangible and he dismisses the possibility of ghosts or an imaginary beast. "Cos things wouldn't make sense. Houses an' streets, an'—TV—they wouldn't work." Of course he is quite right, save that he forgets he is now on an island where the artifacts of the civilization he has always known are meaningless.

It is another important character, Simon, who understands that there may indeed be a beast, even if not a palpable one—"maybe it's only us." The scientist Piggy has recognized it is possible to be frightened of people, but he finds this remark of Simon's dangerous nonsense. Still Simon is right, as

we see from his interview with the sow's head on a stake, which is the lord of the flies. He is right that the beast is in the boys themselves, and he alone discovers that what has caused their terror is in reality a dead parachutist ironically stifled in the elaborate clothing worn to guarantee survival. But Simon's failure is the inevitable failure of the mystic—what he knows is beyond words; he cannot impart his insights to others. Having an early glimpse of the truth, he cannot tell it.

Simon became inarticulate in his effort to express mankind's essential illness. Inspiration came to him.

"What's the dirtiest thing there is?"

As an answer Jack dropped into the uncomprehending silence that followed it the one crude expressive syllable. Release was like an orgasm. Those littluns who had climbed back on the twister fell off again and did not mind. The hunters were screaming with delight.

Simon's effort fell about him in ruins; the laughter beat him cruelly and he shrank away defenseless to his seat.

Mockery also greets Simon later when he speaks to the lord of the flies, though this time it is sophisticated, adult mockery:

"Fancy thinking the Beast was something you could hunt and kill!" said the head. For a moment or two the forest and all the other dimly appreciated places echoed with the parody of laughter.

Tragically, when Simon at length achieves a vision so clear that he is readily communicable he is killed by the pig hunters in their insane belief that he is the very evil which he alone has not only understood but actually exorcised. Like the martyr, he is killed for being precisely what he is not.

The inadequacy of Jack is the most serious of all, and here perhaps if anywhere in the novel we have a personification of absolute evil. Though he is the most mature of the boys (he alone of all the characters is given a last name), and though as head of the choir he is the only one with any experience of leadership, he is arrogant and lacking in Ralph's charm and warmth. Obsessed with the idea of hunting, he organizes his choir members into a band of killers. Ostensibly they are to kill pigs, but pigs alone do not satisfy them, and pigs are in any event not needed for food. The blood lust once aroused demands nothing less than human blood. If Ralph represents purely civil authority, backed only by his own good will, Piggy's wisdom, and the crowd's easy willingness to be ruled, Jack stands for naked ruthless power, the police force or the military force acting without restraint and gradually absorbing the whole state into itself and anni-

hilating what it cannot absorb. Yet even Jack is inadequate. He is only a little boy after all, as we are sharply reminded in a brilliant scene at the end of the book, when we suddenly see him through the eyes of the officer instead of through Ralph's, and he is, like all sheer power, anarchic. When Ralph identifies himself to the officer as "boss," Jack, who has just all but murdered him, makes a move in dispute, but overawed at last by superior power, the power of civilization and the British Navy, implicit in the officer's mere presence, he says nothing. He is a villain (are his red hair and ugliness intended to suggest that he is a devil?), but in our world of inadequacies and imperfections even villainy does not fulfill itself completely. If not rescued, the hunters would have destroyed Ralph and made him, like the sow, an offering to the beast; but the inexorable logic of Ulysses makes us understand that they would have proceeded thence to self-destruction.

Then everything includes itself in power,  
Power into will, will into appetite;  
And appetite, an universal wolf,  
So doubly seconded with will and power,  
Must make perforce an universal prey,  
And last eat up himself.

The distance we have travelled from Ballantyne's cheerful unrealities is both artistic and moral. Golding is admittedly symbolic; Ballantyne professed to be telling a true story. Yet it is the symbolic tale that, at least for our times, carries conviction. Golding's boys, who choose to remember nothing of their past before the plane accident; who, as soon as Jack commands the choir to take off the robes marked with the cross of Christianity, have no trace of religion; who demand to be ruled and are incapable of being ruled properly; who though many of them were once choir boy's (Jack could sing C sharp) never sing a note on the island; in whose minds the great tradition of Western culture has left the titles of a few books for children, a knowledge of the use of matches (but no matches), and hazy memories of planes and TV sets—these boys are more plausible than Ballantyne's. His was a world of blacks and whites: bad hurricanes, good islands; good pigs obligingly allowing themselves to be taken for human food, bad sharks disobligingly taking human beings for shark food; good Christians, bad natives; bad pirates, good boys. Of the beast within, which demands blood sacrifice, first a sow's head, then a boy's, Ballantyne has some vague notion, but he cannot take it seriously. Not only does Golding see the beast; he sees that to keep it at bay we have civilization; but when by



some magic or accident civilization is abolished and the human animal is left on his own, dependent upon his mere humanity, then being human is not enough. The beast appears, though not necessarily spontaneously or inevitably, for it never rages in Ralph or Piggy or Simon as it does in Roger or Jack; but it is latent in all of them, in the significantly named Piggy, in Ralph, who sometimes envies the abandon of the hunters and who shares the desire to "get a handful" of Robert's "brown, vulnerable flesh," and even in Simon burrowing into his private hiding place. After Simon's death Jack attracts all the boys but Ralph and the loyal Piggy into his army. Then when Piggy is killed and Ralph is alone, only civilization can save him. The timely arrival of the British Navy is less theatrical than logically necessary to make Golding's point. For civilization defeats the beast. It slinks back into the jungle as the boys creep out to be rescued; but the beast is real. It is there, and it may return.

**Source:** Carl Niemeyer, "The Coral Island Revisited," in *College English*, Vol. 22, No. 4, January, 1961, pp. 241-45.

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